

M. J. Conrads (Cunningham articles)
#1

Newark Sunday News MAGAZINE

Section V

October 5, 1952

ATLANTIC

Seashore county first of Jersey's 21
to be featured in new magazine series

(SEE PAGES 13, 14, 16, 18)



Atlantic County has Changed a lot Since
Eric Mullica Gave his Name to River and
Mendham's Dr. Jonathan Pitney Vowed That
Little Absecon was an Earthly Paradise



New Jersey's great Inland Waterway provides eye-opening vistas as it ribbons along Atlantic County coast. This scene is Risley's Channel.

(This is the first of a series of articles dealing with New Jersey's 21 counties, sketching their past and present with, now and then, a peek into their future. The counties will be considered in alphabetical order each week in The Newark Sunday News Magazine. Next Sunday: Bergen County.)

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

WEARINESS showed in the stranger's face as he reined his horse to a stop in front of Ann Riseley's tavern in Absecon on a bright May day in 1820, yet his vibrancy and his spirit were apparent to those on the tavern steps. As the stranger dismounted one of the loungers spoke up:

"Where you fixin' to go, Cap'n?"

The horseman smiled as he replied, "I aim to stay right here." Dropping his saddlebags to the ground, he introduced himself as Dr. Jonathan Pitney, lately from Mendham in far-off Morris County. The welcome was spontaneous; if there was one thing needed in this sandy stretch at the edge of the Pine Barrens it was a doctor. Absecon was glad he aimed to stay.

Dr. Pitney soon realized something which the oyster fishermen at Leed's Point and the salt makers on nearby Absegami Island failed to grasp — that here on the edge of the rolling Atlantic Ocean was an earthly paradise. Here among the unpopulated sand dunes was health and here was wealth. No one begrudged Doc Pitney the notion in 1820, so 40 years later when they called him "The Father of Atlantic City" no one begrudged him the title.

THERE was agreement, though, that the Atlantic Ocean could mean wealth. Through the years the sea had been the thoroughfare which brought strangers to the coast; the Mullica, Great Egg Harbor and Tuckahoe rivers had been the avenues which led inland to the thick pine forests.

Early in the 1600s bold men had come to hunt whales off the coast. Eric Mullica in 1645 had led a tiny band of Swedish colonists up the river named in his honor. Eric had come to stay; considerably less interested in colonization were men like pirate

Blackbeard and his ilk, who sallied forth from the countless bays and coves west of Absegami Island to prey on sailing ships.

Deep in the pine forest back of the coast, enterprising Philadelphians exploited the bog iron in the swamps. One of the earliest of the iron men was Charles Read, who came to the shores of Lake Nescochogue in the 1750s. He built a manor at Sweetwater (now Pleasant Mills) and lived in feudal splendor.

Down along Great Egg Harbor River another bog iron dynasty began in 1754 when Samuel Richards arrived at Weymouth to take over 86,000 acres of woodland and swamps (greater than the present area of all of Essex County). He acquired title for \$28,000—about 33 cents an acre.

SIX YEARS later George May sailed up the Great Egg Harbor in 1760 to open a store to supply vessels which put in for timber at the head of the tide. Soon, of course, he was also exchanging Weymouth bog iron for sugar, rice and indigo from the Caro-

linas. By Revolutionary War time May's Landing attained a humming shipbuilding status.

Iron men helped the resurgent Continental troops with products from their forges, yet the area's greatest roles in the fight for independence were played by its sailors. The same bays which so nobly served the whalers and the lawless also proved splendid ports of call for privateers, who slipped out into the ocean to maul British shipping. The privateers did much for the cause (and right well for themselves, too, with sales from captured Royal vessels).

Inevitably the British decided to punish the privateers. They set 800 British regulars ashore at Chestnut Neck on October 6, 1778, and swarmed over the thin breastworks of the village defenders. Routed, the Colonial forces retreated up the Mullica River toward the iron works at Batsto. The pursuing Redcoats followed.

Meanwhile, 90 woodland volunteers picked up their muskets and marched within earshot of the

(Continued on Following Page)



Colorful procession during Our Lady of Mt. Carmel celebration in Hammonton. The annual

affair draws up to 50,000 visitors to town and is one of largest of its kind in country.



Ocean front at Atlantic City, "The World's Greatest Playground," where most of the 15,000,000 annual visitors to Atlantic County pause to play.

ATLANTIC COUNTY

(Continued from Preceding Page)

British. Daybreak found the Continental "Johnny Raws" (untrained troops) deployed in the woods, waiting for the enemy. The ambush was a success and the invaders fell back. A second volley made the retreat a rout; the British were driven forever from these South Jersey pines.

GREAT was the joy in the forest that night, particularly at the Read Mansion, where beautiful and dynamic Honoria Read presided over the celebration. The mansion at Sweetwater reflected not only the joy of the moment but also the greater joy of the Reads—their happiness in the prosperity they had found in this woodland.

Long after, in 1855, Charles Peterson used the life at Sweetwater as the basis for the first truly New Jersey novel, "Kate Aylesford, or the Life of the Refugees." (Today the Read house, still standing, is known as Aylesford Mansion).

Inland bog iron works neared peak production by 1800. Forges prospered at Weymouth, Gloucester, Etna and Walker's Forge. The Weymouth:

(Continued on Page 16)



Blueberry picking keeps hundreds of workers busy in pineland area along Mullica River.

Color photos by Tuttle.



Plenty of entertainment is provided for vacationists. This former paper mill at Pleasant Mills is now Summer theater and dwelling.



Atlantic County, state's fourth largest. The highest point is only 132 feet above sea level.



Court House at Mays Landing was built in 1838, year after county was formed by cutting off section of Gloucester.



Iron forges once prospered in several Atlantic towns and iron headstones are still found in many small communities.

ATLANTIC COUNTY

(Continued from Page 11)

holdings at the time Dr. Pitney came to Absecon in 1820 serve well to tell the story. The vast tract was split into centers of 20,000 acres apiece, each subdivided into 10 divisions to provide for constant forest growth.

Eight large wagonloads of charcoal were fed into the maw of the 30-foot-high furnace each day. Two men at the top of the furnace dumped six baskets of charcoal ever few minutes over the iron melting below. Huge bellows driven by water power kept the blast hot enough to send a stream of molten metal running out the bottom and into molds where stove parts, iron pipes and hitching posts were cast. Philadelphia's first water pipes came from Weymouth in 1801 and many a hitching post in that city bore the big "W" of the woodland iron empire. Sometimes iron markers were cast for graves, and enough of these still remain in Atlantic County to confirm the boast that bog iron was "nonrusting."

Other industrialists found fortunes in the for-

ests. William Coffin built a glass works in 1812 on a tract he named Hammond Town for his son, John Hammond Coffin. William Lippincott built a cotton textile factory at Sweetwater and renamed the village Pleasant Mills. Later, Coffin & Co. followed Lippincott to Pleasant Mills to establish another glass works. Gloucester Furnace was producing 800 tons of iron, mostly "country" castings (sashweights, etc.) by 1834, only slightly less than Weymouth.

It was prosperity of the limited nature nonetheless.

There was nothing about this thinly settled country to cause Gloucester County to protest when the State Legislature carved away 613 square miles on February 7, 1837, to set up Atlantic County. Nor was there cause for dissension in the new county when Mays Landing—with its three taverns, four stores, one Methodist Church and 25 or 30 houses—was chosen county seat. The new county started building its brick court house in 1838.

Possibly the least attractive spot of all Atlantic County was the coast, particularly the island which had been the haven of pirates and squatters until Jeremiah Leeds acquired legitimate title to the land

and moved there early in the 19th Century. Only one hand was needed to count the houses on the island when Dr. Pitney first visited there in 1820.

A FEW hardy sportsmen found their way to the beach, where bird life was so plentiful that Jeremiah Leeds could tell of killing 48 "squawks" with one blast of his mighty gun. Mostly they stayed at the boarding house which Jeremiah's widow, Aunt Millie, opened in 1838. Others, the younger set, were more likely to head for "Uncle" Ryan Adams's place near Rum Point.

They undressed among the dunes (until Uncle Ryan built them crude—and airy—bathhouses out of brush) and "down to the beach they danced to strains of Fisher's hornpipe, discoursed by a single fiddle." At high tide they bathed, and "the hilarity of the occasion culminated when the young men carried the blushing and screaming maidens to the tops of steep sand hills and, tying their feet together, rolled them down to the water's edge."

Still, any one who seriously wanted to frequent the Atlantic County coast went to Somers Point: "Quite a good place of resort for the Summer, with boarding houses for the accommodation of strangers."

NO ONE ever left Somers Point without learning of the gallant Master Commandant Richard Somers of the United States Navy, a local boy who had risen to become the brilliant young commander of the Intrepid, a vessel loaded with explosives and assigned to destroy the enemy fleet at Tripoli in 1804. Young Somers, only 26 years old, sailed the Intrepid close to the enemy when suddenly his vessel exploded with a mighty roar, killing Somers and 12 others.

Dr. Pitney, often on the beach in the pursuit of his professional duties, constantly admired its rugged beauty and its healthful air. He loved to walk along the sandy beach, and one day in 1845, as he stood on a hill with Gen. Enoch Doughty watching the rolling green ocean, he exclaimed:

"This should become the El Dorado of the Atlantic Coast, Enoch!"

By 1852 Dr. Pitney and Gen. Doughty enlisted the enthusiasm of Richard Osborne, a railroad engineer, and young Samuel Richards, described as having "pleasing manners and tireless energy" (qualities which have marked Atlantic City promoters ever since). They applied for a railroad charter, finally had it granted in March, 1852, mainly because the powerful Camden & Amboy Railroad men never dreamed that a railroad to the shore would be successful.

ABSEGAMI ISLAND received the name which now has meaning throughout the world on a day in the middle of January in 1853 when a group of men sat around a table to discuss plans for Bathing Village.

Osborne listened quietly, then suggested the board get on with his plan for the city. He unrolled his "great and well-finished map" and across the top the board saw "in large letters of gold, stretching over the waves that were delineated thereon as breaking on Absecon Beach the words:

"Atlantic City"

Thus, for the ages and the unborn vacationists and souvenir labelers was the city named. It was the name officially adopted March 3, 1854, when incorporation papers were signed.

Quickly the adult males in the scattered houses along the beach organized. Only 18 of the 21 eligible voters on May 1, 1854, dropped ballots through the slit in the cigar box, fastened with yellow tape to insure the inviolability of the ballot. Every one who desired an office was elected, with Chalkley S. Leeds chosen as the first mayor.

THEY got down to business, passed regulations governing bathing and real estate taxes. Then they passed two ordinances, into which perhaps may be read lasting significance: The first was to control liquor licenses; the second, to authorize the building of a jail. That cleared the way for such things as schools.

The first Camden & Atlantic Railroad train rolled over the flat country from Camden in 2½ hours on July 1, 1854, carrying 600 dignitaries and the press to a celebration in the as yet unfinished United States Hotel, but the guests were glad to get back to Philadelphia the same evening.

Dr. Pitney's dream grew slowly at first, hampered by both the lack of accommodations and the elements. The first excursionists amused themselves plodding through the sand among the grassy slopes, gathering seashells or clambering over the hulks of wrecked ships. Nature played a cruel hand in 1857 when the coldest Winter the coast ever experienced froze ice six feet deep in the bays.

(Continued on Page 18)

ATLANTIC COUNTY

(Continued from Page 16)

EVEN worse was the fly and mosquito plague of 1858, when greenhead flies, gnats and mosquitos threatened to wrest the island away from humans. Horses covered with blood wandered through the streets; cattle waded into the ocean to escape the torture. Excursionists begged train crews to leave far before scheduled time.

The Camden & Atlantic Railroad sought earnestly to improve the beach, both because of the benefits it would bring to its railroad and also because most of its promoters were in the land company which had bought on the beach for \$17.50 an acre, in the hopes they might sell it some day for "as high as \$500."

In 1870 Jacob Keim, tired of the sand being tracked through the rugs in his Chester House Hotel, discussed the matter with Alex Boardman, conductor on the railroad (who was tired of sand in his coaches). The two agreed the solution was a walk on the beach. Boardman's bosses thought so much of the idea that they gave him a leave of absence to promote it. The first walk opened June 26, 1870—called "Boardman's Walk," some say—was eight feet wide and laid directly on the sands. The present permanent walk, the fifth in the line of succession, was built in 1939.

The first of the famous boardwalk piers came to Atlantic City in 1882 and others followed as promoters saw the advantages of having all that space with so little frontage. Before the turn of the century the piers were both numerous and lasting.

NATURALLY as business boomed in the resort city other enterprising railroad men saw the light. In 1877 the pressure of traffic was so great that the Narrow Gauge (with track only 3½ feet wide) was built from Camden to Atlantic City in the phenomenally short time of 98 days. The Narrow Gauge quickly cut fares and moved in on the business.

Elsewhere the railroads brought mixed blessings. Hammonton and Egg Harbor City—both beside the tracks—found new life. New life had to be found, since the railroads which had nurtured Atlantic City ruined bog iron dynasties by making North Jersey iron ore far more accessible.

The Gloucester Farm and Town Association was organized in 1854, bought 36,000 acres and split them up into 20-acre divisions in its new city of Egg Harbor. The establishment of the association also coincided with the wave of "America for Americans" feeling which swept the country in the 1850s under auspices of the Know Nothing party. Hundreds of German immigrants flocked to the association to settle in Egg Harbor.

Egg Harbor's Germans were mostly cultured people, who, according to an early chronicler, "abhorred whiskey but liked wine." They were delighted when John Wild found in 1858 that the surrounding soil was suitable for the growing of grapes. H. T. Dewey & Sons established a commercial winery in 1867 but, oddly enough (in that very German section), it was a Frenchman who established the greatest winery.

He was Louis N. Renault, stranded in this country by the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 while serving as an emissary for the Duc De Montebello. Seeking to establish himself, Renault started the Egg Harbor winery which since has grown to nation-wide prominence.

OUT of the western strip of the county one of South Jersey's greatest promoters, Charles K. Landis, interested Judge Richard J. Byrnes in 1858 in the possibility of a city rising in the Hammonton area where William Coffin's glass works had prospered. Scores of New Englanders, struck by the beauty of Landis's word pictures, headed for Hammonton. Years later most still remembered the shock when their train stopped at Hammonton and they stepped down. There wasn't even a station—the only marker was a lime hogshead on which "Hammonton" was crudely lettered.

Yet they stayed. They found the soil ideal for fruits and berries and they found the Landis-Byrnes idea of small lots for people of limited means highly attractive. By 1868 they were shipping seven carloads of strawberries daily to Philadelphia. Landis moved farther afield, went abroad to Italy and told Italians of Hammonton.

At first the Italians stayed on the edge of town, making the soil yield returns which astounded the New Englanders. By 1876 they had started their annual July 16 celebration of the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. That feast, with its colorful parade, still draws many thousands of people to Hammonton.

Egg Harbor grew into a city of 4,000 by 1950 and Hammonton had grown into a town of 8,400 the

same year, with the German element clinging to Egg Harbor region and the Italians clustered along the western strip of the county just beyond the pines. Mays Landing grew slowly and quietly into a bustling county seat with a 1952 population of 2,300, still surrounded by thick forests whose stretches are broken only by the remarkably straight and well-kept highways and the "Atlantic City" Race Track at McKee City—a pleasant spot literally carved out of the pines.

CLOSE to Atlantic City, Pleasantville grew too, attracting many residents across Lake's Bay to the region which William Lake, Long Island whaler, had first settled in 1702. Two of William's descendants are still revered in aptly named Pleasantville—Simon Lake, inventor of the Lake Submarine, and Jesse Lake, inventor of the self-track-laying car.

Simon Lake's early life was spent in Pleasantville. All countries now use his patents in their submarines. Jesse Lake's self-track machine was invented to aid in building the first highway between the mainland and Atlantic City in the 1860s. The self-track car carried sand and gravel and other materials across the soft meadows and tiny streams. Today the principle is used on farm tractors and on lethal tanks.

Pleasantville was incorporated as a borough in 1888 and adopted the city form of government in 1914. Within the very shadow of the world's greatest amusement area, it is now home to 14,000 people.

Yet, Dr. Pitney's dream became dominant in the county.

Atlantic City's 1950 population of 61,642 is almost half the total county population of 132,879 and another 40,000 people live within immediately surrounding communities. Highways annually carry 4,500,000 cars to the city; the railroad owes its existence to the pleasure spot. The 15,000,000 annual visitors to the county generally don't stop to learn about Hammonton or Pleasant Mills or Weymouth or Mays Landing—they head for the boardwalk.

OBVIOUSLY all of Atlantic County has been resort-conscious for three-quarters of a century, absorbed in Miss America pageants and believing what the public relations men have to say. But some remember what happened during the depression to the city with all its eggs in a recreation basket.

Atlantic City was at its prosperous peak when Wall Street collapsed. The tremendous Convention Hall opened May 31, 1929, celebrating the city's 75th birthday. Hotel building went on apace. Money rolled in.

Then came the crash and Atlantic City was hard hit. Banks, 28 of them, collapsed in the city. Business fell flat. World War II brought a resurgence of trade and with it hundreds of thousands of soldiers to take over the hotels. Naturally Atlantic City has found lush times in postwar spending for rest and relaxation. Now, for the first time since 1929, new buildings are appearing on the boardwalk.

This time, however, there are forces working to find other means of support—not that there is the slightest fear that Americans will stop seeking recreation, come war or high water.

PARTICULARLY interested in acquainting the outside world (and particularly its industrial leaders) with Atlantic County are the townships and cities in the western part, where thousands of acres of land stretch uninhabited and unused. Towns like Hammonton, for example, proud of its beautiful streets, its Peach Blossom Festival and its position as "The Hub of South Jersey," are inviting industry to come and look around. The Southern New Jersey Development Council is pushing energetically to unite all of the southern counties in seeking industry. Even Atlantic City would welcome some industry—provided it doesn't have smoking chimneys, of course—to help ease seasonal unemployment.

So has Dr. Pitney's child grown. Today there is no difficulty in getting medical indorsement for the city. It's established that the city is "the El Dorado of the Atlantic Coast"—and more. But the bog iron forges have long since fallen to ruin and the memory of Kate Aylesford is dying.

It isn't likely that 15 of the 15,000,000 visitors to Atlantic City know of Dr. Pitney. It's certain, though, that few would be other than glad that the Mendham physician "aimed to stay" that day in May, 1820.



Absecon Light, no longer used, stands at northern end of Atlantic City as a symbol of old sailing vessel days.



Louis Renault, stranded by the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, started winery at Egg Harbor that bears his name.



Chestnut Hill monument commemorates battle in which Continental "Johnny Raws" ambushed British in pine woods.

COVER PHOTO

A feature of Miss America pageant at Atlantic City is the boardwalk parade pictured on cover. Neva Jane Langley of Georgia, 19, is newest Miss America.